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SUBJECT: QUEBEC SOVEREIGNTY MOVEMENT ADRIFT

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CLASSIFIED BY: Abigail Friedman, Consul General, Quebec City, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (sbu) Summary: PM Harper's "open federalism" comes at a propitious time: sovereignty is not dead in Quebec, but it is in remission. After four decades of struggle, two failed referendums and drawn out constitutional battles, a general sense of weariness seems to have settled in among a certain class of Quebec sovereigntists. A generation of voters, whose vision of an independent Quebec was based on a left-leaning ideology of identity, cultural and linguistic pride, and control over one's political destiny, is today expressing doubt. Others resent efforts to turn Quebec independence into a purely economic debate. All this being said, the pro-sovereignty Parti Quebecois (PQ) remains very popular, in good part because Premier Charest's liberal government is not. End summary.

12. (u) Recently, there were at least two highly public manifestations of the unease of long-time sovereigntists over where the independence movement in Quebec is headed: one came from highly-acclaimed Quebec author Michel Tremblay, at one time an icon of the Quebec independence movement who snubbed the Order of Canada. In an interview April 9, Tremblay hit a sensitive political nerve when he stated he was unable to relate to a project whose main justification has become economic; an ideological shift, he said, merely to win elections. Shortly after, internationally renowned Quebec playwright Robert Lepage made similar comments that he was "less convinced" that Quebec should separate from the rest of Canada.

13. (u) Reaction to both declarations, coming from two cultural heroes, was swift and at times hostile, particularly among the Quebec literati. Former PQ Premier Bernard Landry reportedly declared he would boycott Michel Tremblay's plays. Several authors expressed outrage at what in Quebec intellectual circles seems close to treason. A political columnist wryly noted that "in Quebec, an artist is a sovereigntist not a federalist," and that it was "probably easier for Michel Tremblay to come out of the closet as a homosexual 30 years ago than to declare himself a doubtful sovereigntist today." In fact, Tremblay and Lepage articulated two very different yet commonly heard trends. While Lepage seemed to question the relevance of sovereignty itself, Tremblay was critical of the way in which sovereignty is being pitched.

14. (c) Former Quebec mayor Jean Paul L'Allier - a dyed in the wool sovereigntist, or so we thought - surprised CG when he told her that he, too, could not support sovereignty based upon an economic argument. What L'Allier, Tremblay and others are attacking is a PQ strategy, begun by former PM Landry and continued under Boisclair, of trying to win Quebecers over to sovereignty by arguing that only then would "Quebec have the financial room for maneuver to invest in favor of its priorities." This economic basis for sovereignty took off after the 1995 referendum, when polls suggested many Quebecers feared

they would be economically less well off in an independent Quebec. Today, in the context of PM Harper's "open federalism," the economic argument for sovereignty may be backfiring, as Quebecers believe that Ottawa is indeed prepared to offer Quebec a better financial relationship.

15. (u) Lepage's critique of the sovereigntists appears more damning as he suggests that the situation in Canada and Quebec has changed, making sovereignty less essential nowadays. A number of media commentators assert that Lepage was merely saying out loud what many sovereignists are feeling inside: that Quebec society has evolved and Canadian nationalism, in a global context, also has changed. We have heard this argument from a number of our own contacts as well, who tell us they were once firm sovereigntists but that conditions in Canada today are different. "Just look at the Olympics," one person told us, "almost every Anglophone Canadian athlete who won an award responded in French to interviews. This wouldn't have happened thirty years or forty years ago." Francophone Montrealers remind us that there were entire shopping districts they never entered in their youth, as francophone Quebecers were unwelcome clientele. Today, thanks to the effects of the French Language Charter, Bill 101, few Quebecers seem to feel a real threat to their identity. If anything, they are insisting that their children have the opportunity to grow up fully bilingual and able to compete in the North American job market.

16. (u) Sensitive to changing public attitudes, pro-sovereignty leaders Andre Boisclair and Gilles Duceppe were careful not to overreact to Tremblay and Lepage's public confessions. Duceppe contacted Tremblay personally to reassure the playwright of his personal support despite Tremblay's political uncertainties. Boisclair, for his part, told journalists the redefinition of the sovereignty movement is a healthy process and does not mean one has to renounce one's convictions.

Comment

17. (c) Into all of this comes the election of Stephen Harper, with his talk of "open federalism" and of righting the fiscal

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imbalance. Much like the election of Brian Mulroney and his Big Blue Machine in 1984, Harper and his progressive conservatives have opened the door to a possible new partnership between Ottawa and the provinces that could further diminish the sovereignist fervor in Quebec. At a time of political uncertainty and transition in Quebec, Harper is giving Quebecers a sense of direction. Many here feel the new open federalism touted by Harper is worth exploring. For this reason, we expect that Harper will have a longer than usual honeymoon period in Quebec.

18. (c) Two important caveats are worth noting: First, Premier Jean Charest has failed miserably in overcoming public dissatisfaction toward himself and his government. As a result, the PQ is ahead in the polls and could very well win the next election. Second, if the PQ wins and calls another sovereignty referendum, we would expect sovereigntists to vote yes despite their current grumbling and professed rejection of the movement. Where their grouching will have an impact, however, is on those Quebecers who are undecided about sovereignty and who would presumably need wooing. With such a slim margin between the "yes" and the "no" camps in Quebec, inspiring swing voters is where the entire referendum game would play out, and it is here where the sovereigntists are presently losing ground.

FRIEDMAN